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FOR SECRETARY SPELLINGS FROM CHARGE DAVID HALE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION'S VISIT TO JORDAN

11. (U) Embassy Amman warmly welcomes you to Jordan. Your participation in the G-8/BMENA Education Ministerial Meeting on Education, as well as bilateral discussions with Queen Rania and other high-level Jordanian, G-8, and BMENA officials will provide an excellent opportunity to highlight America's message on education reform in the BMENA region to Jordan and the world.

12. (U) Jordan is not only one of our closest allies in the region, but it is fully engaged in supporting our most important efforts, including creating a free Iraq, fulfillment of the President's vision of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, defeating global terrorism, and advancing comprehensive Jordanian and Arab reform. Your program in Jordan will send important messages, underlining America's readiness for dialogue with Arab youth, our support for interactive, IT-based learning, and our respect for the region's deep religious and historical heritage.

13. (U) The King and Queen place a high priority on providing hope and jobs to Jordanian youth, an effort in which education plays a crucial role. They realize that a large number of Jordanian high school and university graduates lack the skills required by the global marketplace and nearly half of them are unable to find jobs on the local economy. To remedy this problem, the GOJ launched an ambitious five year, \$380 million reform initiative in July 2003. The U.S. has committed more than USD 50 million to support this effort.

14. (U) Background on Jordan's Education Reform Efforts: In 1990, the GOJ launched a two phase education reform program with the support of the World Bank. These initiatives improved primary and secondary school curriculum, supported school construction/renovation, and strengthened teacher training and vocational education. Results from this program included: improved universal access to primary and secondary education for Jordanian children, and impressive gains in the upgrading of teacher's skills. Nonetheless, challenges still remain. As a result, the GOJ launched a comprehensive program of reform, called the Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy Initiative (ERfKE) in July 2003 to address the future human capacity requirements of Jordan through improved early childhood, primary, and secondary education. Due to increased USG assistance, Jordan has already adopted an early childhood education curriculum developed by USAID, and over the next three years, the U.S. will help develop e-learning programs for secondary schools, including on-line civics and English as a Second Language courses. Jordan is attempting to equip all classrooms with information technology; 50 "Discovery Schools" (including the one you will visit in Amman) have already been connected to broadband internet, thanks to U.S. assistance. The U.S. will soon launch a pilot school-to-work program in partnership with the private sector.

15. (U) A Closer Look at the Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy Initiative (ERfKE): As mentioned above, the Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy initiative was conceived by the GOJ in partnership with USAID, the World Bank and other donors. In 2002, USAID/Jordan supported the development of the integrated ERfKE project framework, in partnership with Jordan's Ministry of Education. This framework outlines the concepts and costs of fully re-orienting Jordan's education system through four main areas of work: (1) re-orientation of education policy, (2) restructuring and realignment of education programs and practices, (3) support for improved physical learning environments, and (4) the promotion of learning readiness through early childhood education. Under ERfKE, the World Bank has approved \$120 million in loans over five years; the GOJ will provide \$130 million; and other donors will contribute \$130 million - of which USAID/Jordan has committed about \$45 million in the two key sectors of early childhood education and youth information technology.

16. (U) A Closer Look at The Jordan Education Initiative: The Jordan Education Initiative was launched at the June

2003 World Economic Forum meeting in Jordan. Its goal is to develop e-curriculum and broadband IT connections for 100 model "Discovery Schools" to advance education reform. To date, USAID/Jordan has committed to providing \$5 million for support of the JEI secretariat, critical IT equipment, and connecting 100 schools to broadband internet links. In February 2004 the Department of State's Partnership Initiatives Office (MEPI) committed \$4 million to support the development of English as a Second Language and Civics e-curriculum. It is likely that the Government of Jordan will assist the Palestinian Authority in launching the Palestinian Education Initiative - an announcement by the GOJ to support this effort is being planned for the G-8/BMENA Ministerial Meeting on May 23rd.

17. (U) We have highlighted below the recent political, economic and social developments that set the context for your program:

18. (SBU) NEW REFORM CABINET IN JORDAN: The performance and prospects of the cabinet, appointed by King Abdullah April 7, are the main item of political discussion in Jordan. The new Prime Minister, Adnan Badran, is a respected academic but has limited political experience. The King chose Badran because he saw him as committed to accelerating the pace of internal political reform. However, the cabinet's economic team -- which has outstanding reformist credentials, and is led by Finance Minister Bassem Awadallah -- has generated strong opposition. Many of the opponents believe they will lose out if the reform program is accelerated, and may see these ministers as too Western-oriented. Forty-six of the 110 members of parliament have signed an open letter pledging that they will withhold their votes of confidence in the new government if PM Badran does not reshuffle his cabinet.

19. (SBU) ECONOMIC REFORM AND GROWTH: Jordan has emerged as a model for economic reform in the region. In close cooperation with USAID, Jordan rewrote its laws and regulations to meet World Trade Organization requirements, modernized its customs regime, and is currently implementing a policy of one-stop service for new investors under a modern investment promotion law. These reforms helped Jordan's GDP of USD 10.8 billion grow by 7.6% last year in real terms, fueled by booming exports to Iraq and the U.S., which increased in 2004 by 60% and 54%, respectively. Jordan still has work to do, however, to reform basic government services, enhance law enforcement, and create a climate of full transparency and accountability. Rising prices, a tax hike approved last year, and widespread unemployment - officially estimated at 13.4%, but probably higher, especially among the youth, are behind complaints of ordinary citizens who feel squeezed. As in most Arab countries, jobs, and the education needed to qualify for them in the globalizing economy, are the number one concern among Jordanian youth. The King and the leadership have a strong vision of how to give young Jordanians the IT and English-language skills needed to compete in a global economy, and you will see first hand at the Discovery School how this is being accomplished.

10. (SBU) POLITICAL REFORM: King Abdullah, who fully understands the U.S. commitment to democracy in the region, replaced the prior cabinet with more reform-minded ministers in April. Earlier in the year, he had appointed two royal commissions and called on them to draft programs aimed at transforming the Jordanian political environment. The first commission is charged with forming a plan to decentralize government decision-making by dividing the country into three regions, each with its own elected legislature. The second is pursuing a broad "national agenda," to be announced no later than September, that will include recommendations on reforming laws on political parties and elections to open further the political process and enhance democratic institutions.

11. (SBU) REACHING JORDAN'S YOUTH: Unemployment and limits on political participation have alienated many Jordanian young people, leaving some prone to extremism. Hostility toward and suspicion of U.S. motives and foreign policy are strong. The U.S. government, through both USAID and the Middle East Partnership Initiative, supports the GOJ's efforts to counter extremist tendencies, starting in the earliest school years. You will have an opportunity to see some of these programs at work, including a visit to a "Discovery School" and a tour and meeting with members of INJAZ - a Junior Achievement-style program. These programs expose young Jordanians to a broad, tolerant view of the world that discourages violence and extremism while respecting Islam and traditional values.